

SOUTHWARD BOUND

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WHEN our birds leave us at the end of summer, we refer to them vaguely as having "gone south". We visualize them fitting through the flowery tropic jungle; stepping daintily along the palm-encircled beaches of the West Indies, or splashing amid the warm shallows of the reedy ponds and swamps of Central and South America.

"Going south", in the case of some species, however, signifies a wide diversity of destinations. To the Arctic Tern, for instance, some of which nest in Nova Scotia, "going south" may mean travelling from as far north as Greenland, crossing the equator and faring on to the Antarctic regions, an air journey of 11,000 miles, requiring about two months to complete, at an average rate of nearly 200 miles a day.

The Sabine Gulls, first cousins to the Tern, some of which also occur along our Atlantic seaboard, gather in the late summer at Point Barrow on the rim of the Canadian Arctic and take off on a southward journey across the Pacific by an unknown route, in due time arriving on the coast of Peru, where a cold current from the South Pole ensures the kind of climate and food which they most enjoy.

Likewise, many of the shore birds, such as plovers and sandpipers, push on to the vast tundras of Paraguay, Peru and Brazil.

Most of our Nova Scotia birds, however, are content to winter much nearer home than the species aforementioned, many of them going no further than the Southern States, while a few are satisfied to loiter in the sunshine and semi-tropical warmth of the islands of the Caribbean.

The real reasons behind the annual southward exodus of our migratory birds still remain somewhat obscure, in spite of the best efforts of science to explain them. Cold and danger of starvation do not seem to afford an entirely satisfactory explanation. The Tree Swallow, for instance, common in Nova Scotia in summer, leaves our shores as early as August, at a time when its food supply is at its height and there is not even a suspicion of chill in the air. On the other hand, the Wild Geese, disdaining to wait for spring and open water, and pushing northward "hard on winter's trail", often encounter such adverse weather conditions that they are

actually obliged to turn back. Woodcock, returning too early, frequently find their favored haunts sealed with ice and snow, at which times their food problems are difficult to solve, and many an April Swallow has perished from cold and starvation in a late spring sleet storm. It would seem indeed that cold is no deterrent whatever to many of the northward-returning migrants, any more than it is the chief factor in that strange autumn "ardor to be gone" which has been the theme of poets and philosophers from the days of Herodotus until now.

Many of our Nova Scotia varieties, as I have intimated, seem content with a comparatively short migration journey, and on a recent trip to the West Indies I had the pleasure of encountering a number of our familiar garden and water birds which winter there, along with many indigenous forms belonging to Bermuda, the Bahamas and Jamaica.

About the middle of February I embarked at Halifax on a three-week tour to these islands, which I had not previously visited. From the deck of the "Lady Rodney", while we were still in sight of the Nova Scotia coast, I observed following us a number of desultory Herring Gulls, whose black wing-tips sharply contrasted with their snowy breasts. These were interspersed with numbers of Iceland and Kumlein Gulls from the Arctic which winter here, apparently looking upon Nova Scotia as their "south". These visitors from the far north are similar in size and general appearance to our native gulls, except that their wings are entirely white, instead of being tipped with black. In the bright morning sunlight these snowy creatures looked positively ethereal, recalling E. J. Pratt's poetic description of them as "those wild orchids of the sea".

By the time we reached Boston the Arctic portion of our winged convoy had fallen far astern, the hundreds then in attendance being all Herring Gulls with here and there a large Black-backed Gull, commonly known as "coffin-carrier" because of the sable "mantle" which covers the back and upper wing surfaces.

Twenty-four hours out of Boston the gulls had all disappeared as we set our course away from the mainland in a direct line for Bermuda, whose low-lying contours at the end of the fourth day out of Halifax became visible on the far horizon.

As we came in closer proximity to the Islands, the ship traversed an intricate course among the coral reefs, following the coast line for several hours before reaching Hamilton Harbor. Here a lone Bonaparte's Gull, not much larger than a pigeon, came winging out to meet us. The eagerness with which he approached

suggested that of a messenger bearing glad tidings of welcome to us northerners, but if the truth were written, it would probably reveal motives much less altruistic. These small gulls nest in the so-called near-Arctic and are found along the shores of Nova Scotia in spring and late summer. The heads of the adult birds are strikingly black, while the rest of the plumage is grey and white.

Prowling about the outskirts of Hamilton a few hours later, I was at once impressed by the scarcity of birds except that the undesirable English Sparrows were everywhere and in numbers uncountable. It is believed these aliens first came to Bermuda as stowaways in the hold of a grain-laden vessel, probably from some Atlantic seaport.

The first pleasant surprise, however, was a loud and varied sweet song, quite unfamiliar, which I presently heard at some distance across a field of Easter lilies, which grow there in great luxuriance. Risking arrest for trespass by ignoring a number of ominous-looking sign-boards, I entered a grove of semi-tropical trees and shrubs in the hope that the songster would reveal his location by another song. Soon the carol rang out again and there before me, at close range, was a gorgeous Cardinal, commonly called on the Island the "Bermuda Red Bird". These are of the grosbeak ilk, being about robin-size with a prominent crest and bright red plumage from head to tail. Soon a demure Catbird made its appearance, hopping along a vine-covered stone fence; seemingly quite unafraid, he allowed me to approach within a few feet. On my enquiring as to when he planned to set out for Nova Scotia, he politely informed me that Bermuda was his home the year round, adding that he couldn't understand why any of his kind were content to live anywhere else. I presume the explanation of his non-migratory habits is that a million or so years ago a number of migrating Catbirds, blown off their course, escaped disaster by landing on Bermuda. Finding the climate to their liking, with no need of departing therefrom on account of a seasonal food shortage, they became permanent residents, and in spite of their segregation through the ages from others of their kind, they have not changed perceptibly from their forebears, being the same mouse-grey color as those with which we are familiar in our own summer gardens.

The only other species seen in Bermuda, which occurs in Nova Scotia in summer, was the Eastern Bluebird. It is not common by any means on the Island, but rather more so than it is here.

Following up another new song, I was soon confronted with a small sparrow-size bird of sluggish movement and nondescript color; greyish-white breast and greenish-olive back with whitish wing-bars, which I decided was some sort of Vireo. On my return home, I discovered on referring to my library that this was unquestionably the Bermuda Vireo, another non-migratory bird which is peculiar to the Island.

Our next stop was Nassau in the Bahamas, which place is truly tropical. Bird life there was much more in evidence and I met, for the first time in life, a number of gifted Mockingbirds, which warbled idly and lazily in the heat of the noonday sun. But their notes, though varied, seemed to lack the enthusiasm I had expected. Along a hedge row, bordering a garden in the center of the city, I was thrilled to meet one of my summer acquaintances of many years standing—a dainty little Yellow Palm Warbler. With us these are woodland birds and are seen about our towns and villages only during the brief migration periods in spring and fall. Therefore, in the heart of this busy super-hot city, they seemed decidedly out of place. A dusky passerby paused enquiringly as he saw me watching the bird, so I asked him what it was; whereupon he replied that it was a "Parakeet". Later I learned from him that he called all small birds by that name, for we found a number of others of tropical origin, which I did not know, but to him they were all "Parakeets".

Playing about with the Yellow Palm in this little clump of shrubbery was another familiar bird of the same tribe from the northland, namely, a Black and White Warbler, which like the Yellow Palm is, with us, a woodland bird. Though they both seemed quite contented in this foreign environment, there seemed to be something lacking, for they did not have the usual sprightliness and animation which characterizes their behavior during their summer sojourn with us. They seemed indolent and though I watched them for some time, there was no attempt at song. Like all our migrating birds, warblers never nest, and seldom, if ever, sing while in the south.

I saw no other familiar bird faces in Nassau but one of the most common native birds is a small dove, or pigeon, which is slightly larger than a robin. They are strange looking little creatures, brownish-grey in color and very tame and confiding. They are known to the residents by the name of "tobacco dove". However, the correct name of this bird is the Zenaida Dove.

At the office of the Colonial Secretary I enquired regarding the bird life of the region, where I was told that the Island of

Andros (one of the Bahamas group) was the "home of birds" and that there one would find a great variety, including the now rather rare Flamingo. Flamingoes are pink and about the size of our Blue Herons, to which general tribe they belong. But Andros was 30 miles away and unfortunately there was not time to make the journey. I learned, however, that due to recurrent tornadoes, and other unfavorable factors, which have played havoc with the nesting colonies, these fantastic looking birds are becoming seriously reduced in numbers.

Jamaica, our next port of call, was about 3 days away and it was not until we neared the harbor of Kingston that I saw any bird life whatsoever. However, within a few miles of the port a huge Frigate Bird, commonly called Man O'War Bird, came sailing majestically along. The wings are long and slender and seem to be double-jointed. In a shoal bay, near the harbor entrance, I was given my first introduction to the native Brown Pelicans, which were diving for fish continuously with a great show of dexterity, similar to that of our own Osprey, though since they dived from low elevations they were not as spectacular as our bird.

As we came close to the city of Kingston, I noticed to my surprise numbers of large dark-colored birds sailing on majestic wing low over the city. They wheeled about in eerie circles with the grace of eagles, and I soon classified them as Vultures. There were dozens of them and on landing I had a close-up view as they circled low over the hotel gardens. They proved to belong to the Black Vulture species, birds that occur as far north as Nova Scotia only by accident. They are the city's street cleaners and are protected rigidly by municipal statute because of their good work as scavengers. Later I saw numbers of them, at even closer range, feeding on some dead thing beside the highway. The driver of the taxi told us that whenever a cat or dog was run over, it was no time before they arrived to devour it, and though he did not say so, I wondered if the same fate would befall the first pick-aninny that was similarly stricken, for these were vastly more in evidence than were cats and dogs. Daylight was supplanted by darkness in Kingston within an incredibly short period of twilight and it was interesting to watch these great sepulchral birds going to roost as darkness came on. It so happened that the gardens of the Myrtle Bank Hotel, which were richly endowed with rows of magnificent palms, were the favored nightly abode of some 30 or 40 of these grotesque birds and I was fascinated to see them sailing in to perch on the broad leaves just over the spacious lawn. Later I learned that these vultures are known locally by

the name of "Jim Crow". They nest in caves, in cavities between rocks, in hollow logs, or on the ground. The family name is *Cathartidae* from a Greek word meaning "cleanser" or "scavenger". (The famous Condor of the Andes is a vulture.) I did not see any of these birds in Bermuda, or in the Bahamas.

In the Public Gardens there were Hummingbirds by the dozens and of at least 4 kinds, all different from anything I had ever seen. I did find there, however, among the parade of bright colored little strangers a female Redstart, which gladdened my heart. Before leaving the garden I called at the office of the Superintendent and while there my attention was attracted to an electric light wire which ran across the ceiling from a hole in the centre. Near the point where it emerged through the plaster was an odd looking enlargement which, on closer examination, proved to be the nest of a Hummingbird, neatly saddled on top of the wire to which it had apparently been made fast by the use of cobwebs. I have frequently found the nest of Hummingbirds in Nova Scotia but never inside a building. Half way up the mountains, which incidentally are 7,000 or more feet high, I was pleased to see another of our summer birds, namely, a Kingbird, which was busily engaged in mopping up insects, of which there was certainly no dearth.

Two days later we sailed northward out of Kingston Harbor, and aside from an occasional Yellow-billed Tropic Bird there were no birds in evidence. These beautiful creatures, gull-like in appearance but considerably smaller than our common gulls, have long slender plume-like, or spike tails; they nest in the white coral cliffs of Bermuda. At this time of year (early March) they were returning northward to that isle for the summer breeding season. A few nights out of Jamaica one of the passengers on the steamer went to his stateroom around midnight. It was warm and balmy, so he had left his port-hole open. As he entered the room he heard an ominous flap, followed by a strange guttural note. Startled, he looked about and at once noticed some foreign-looking substance on his bed. On examination it proved to be some 6 or 8 small, semi-digested fishes. By this time the gentleman's ire was well aroused. Then there was another flap and his attention became focussed on a pair of beady eyes and the sinister gaping beak of a large bird which was reclining in the waste-paper basket. As he approached, it made a hostile lunge at him, so he quickly covered the basket with a heavy box and came to my room to ask my advice. On examination I found it was none other than one of these Yellow-billed Tropic Birds. There was much speculation among the passengers next day as to why and how the

bird had done such a stupid thing as to enter the port-hole of a moving ship. My surmise is that this bird, probably weary from a long flight, sought rest on what appeared to be a familiar white cliff (the ship was painted white) and fluttering about for a projection on which to alight, fell in through the port-hole. Next morning in the presence of an admiring group of passengers, this stowaway, with its glittering white plumage, was given its liberty, being none the worse for its experience. In the Provincial Museum at Halifax may be seen a mounted specimen of the Yellow-billed Tropic Bird, which was presumably carried to Nova Scotia before a heavy August gale that ranged northward along the Atlantic coast in 1927. The specimen was picked up at Wolfville in an exhausted condition and did not long survive.

Between Bermuda and Boston, bird life was absent until we neared the latter port, when a couple of Herring Gulls mysteriously appeared, seemingly out of the sea. These followed us for some time and then were joined by many others as we neared port. Two days later I arrived at my home in the Annapolis Valley to find that, in spite of the mild winter just ending, I had returned ahead of the first migrants. Within a few days, however, the Canada Geese were reported on the Grand Pre Meadows, and it was not long before the clear notes of Song Sparrows and Robins filled the early morning air. These are the advance guard of the winged legions, which, each year at this season, press northward across a continent-wide front, announcing unmistakably by their arrival the return of another spring.